

Summary:
A Symposium on Making New York Safer
September 8, 2006

On July 5, the White House released an updated National Strategy for Combating Terrorism. “America is safer but we are not yet safe,” it states. The same could be said about New York, or at least that was the view expressed by many of the participants in a recent symposium hosted by the Council on Foreign Relations, entitled “Making New York Safer.” In his opening remarks, Council President **Richard N. Haass** suggested New York could never be truly “safe,” but “one can take steps to make New York and other places ‘safer,’ and that is what we are trying to advance.” The symposium explored threats from and potential responses to both man-made and natural disasters.

Major points discussed in symposium include:

- **New York is a prime target**, or as ABC News Chief Investigative Correspondent **Brian Ross** put it, “We are the big bull’s-eye.” R.P. Eddy, senior fellow for counterterrorism and executive director of the Center for Policing Terrorism at the Manhattan Institute, explained that the al-Qaeda network is most interested in carrying out attacks that have an economic impact, a symbolic element, and to an extent, target Jews. Because New York City is the financial and cultural center of the United States, “It’s all here,” said **Steven Simon**, Hasib J. Sabbagh senior fellow for Middle Eastern studies at the Council.
- **The threat is evolving.** While “al-Qaeda central” is inclined to carry out well-coordinated attacks on a massive scale, “self-radicalized” individuals are more likely to aim for more modest targets. Such an attack is much harder to prevent, and Eddy predicted the next attack on the United States is likely to come at the hands of someone who is “a lot closer to the Columbine killers” than jihadis seeking to create a caliphate. Simon said a greater threat occurs when such individuals reach out to larger, more established groups who help enhance “both their ambitions and their capabilities.” This is exemplary of the kind of evolving threat that New York faces. In many ways, Eddy said, al-Qaeda has simply become the “idea of mass destruction.”
- **The homegrown threat in the United States is different than it is in Europe.** Since 2001, most homegrown terrorists in both places have come out of local Islamic communities. These communities are, generally speaking, more culturally and economically assimilated in the United States than they are in Europe. Part of the reason for this is that there is a longer history of Islamic immigrants in the United States than in many parts of Europe, Simon said. Nevertheless, in the last five years, many American Muslims have become increasingly disaffected, which is a dangerous trend. “This is a community, ultimately, on whom we will rely for our security,” Simon said. One way to do this is to encourage local police to establish good relationships with leaders of the Islamic communities they serve. Heightened trust and understanding between beat cops and community leaders

allows police officers to become “first preventers and not just first responders,” Eddy said.

- **Not all weapons of mass destruction are the same.** Though often lumped into the same category, chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear weapons are all quite different. Nuclear warheads, though the most devastating of the group, are exceedingly hard to come by, and thus a nuclear attack is highly unlikely. While more accessible, chemical weapons are much less destructive. “There’s a real question about whether most chemical weapons should even be considered in the [same] category,” said **Richard K. Betts**, Council adjunct fellow for national security studies and director of Columbia University’s Institute of War and Peace, adding that he is more concerned about the possibility of a biological attack. Though biological weapons are difficult to deploy effectively, they are easier to obtain than nuclear weapons and have comparable killing potential. As **Isaac B. Weisfuse**, deputy commissioner of the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, pointed out, the fifth anniversary of the first anthrax letter is also approaching, and the perpetrator of those attacks remains at large. Radiological weapons, or “dirty bombs” have far less killing capacity, though their economic and psychological impact could be very high. For this reason, **William Raisch**, executive director of the International Center for Enterprise Preparedness, dubbed them “weapons of mass hysteria.” Beyond the immediate impact, a radiological attack would contaminate a portion of the city. “You’ll see the scars of that event for years,” said Office of Emergency Management Deputy Commissioner for Planning and Preparedness **Kelly McKinney**.
- **The “all hazards” approach to preparedness.** Though the threats to New York—both man made and natural—vary greatly, preparations for dealing with disasters are often the same. Raisch refers to this as the “all hazards” approach, and it is relevant to governments, private companies, and individuals. **Joseph W. Pfeifer**, the Fire Department’s chief of counterterrorism and emergency preparedness, explained that his organization’s core competencies—responding to fires, casualties, contamination, and structural collapse—are applicable across the spectrum of potential terrorist attacks and natural disasters. Companies that have contingency plans in the event of a major disruption, regardless of the cause, will be more resilient in the aftermath of a disaster. Individuals who have stockpiled enough food and water to shelter themselves in their homes and planned what to do in the event of an evacuation are less likely to become part of the problem in the aftermath of a catastrophe.
- **Government regulation of private sector preparedness.** Panelists disagreed about the extent to which the federal government should regulate preparedness in the private sector. **Stephen E. Flynn**, the Council’s Jeane J. Kirkpatrick senior fellow for national security studies, suggested the current level of government regulation is insufficient, while Department of Homeland Security Chief Medical Officer **Jeffrey W. Runge** pointed to areas where there are federal guidelines for preparedness. Critical infrastructure, 85 percent of which is privately owned, is

one area where clear standards do exist. Yet there was general agreement that more can be done. One simple step would be to provide better incentives for private companies to take precautionary measures. Raisch suggested tax breaks for companies who meet preparedness guidelines could be an effective tool.

- **The private sector can assist in both prevention and disaster response.** Some private companies are in a unique position to detect suspicious activity in advance of a terrorist attack. Eddy explained that in New York and several other cities, law enforcement officials have approached companies selling crop dusters, fertilizer, rental spaces, or other items that could be used in a terrorist attack, and taught them how to identify and report potentially dangerous behavior. Other companies have the capacity to provide services in the wake of a disaster. Flynn described how, in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, it was private shipping companies that were most able to quickly transport supplies to victims. He also mentioned that in Los Angeles, “big box” stores such as WalMart have been tapped as potential evacuation centers.

The symposium was comprised of three sessions. The first focused on the terrorist threat in New York. Eddy said that while the al-Qaeda network that attacked the United States on September 11, 2001 remains a menace, “We now have a more localized threat, homegrown threats.” There is also a broad spectrum in terms of the variety of terrorist attacks New York might incur. On the low end are such things as backpack bombs in subways, car bombs on the streets, or school shootings. At the other extreme are attacks using chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear weapons. With regard to smaller attacks, Betts said, “I think people could learn to live with it if it's something that happened once every six months and killed five or six people. It would be awful, but it would not be the same as a radiological weapon going off.” But Simon warned we should expect to suffer a radiological attack in the next five years, though the attack itself would be relatively minor. “Its impact will go far beyond its immediate human cost in economic terms and in psychological and emotional terms,” Simon suggested

Several New York City officials told the second session of the symposium they are prepared for such an attack. McKinney, Pfeifer, and Weisfuse described in detail how the city’s various agencies would respond to a radiological attack as well as to the occurrence of a category two hurricane. The panelists agreed one of the most important elements of such a response is clear communication with the public. Pfeifer said much of the fear and panic that follows in the wake of a disaster can be assuaged if people have faith in their government’s ability to respond effectively. In contrast to the failure at the national level to respond effectively to Hurricane Katrina, New York City is prepared for its response, “We’re going to save ourselves,” McKinney said.

That self-saving mentality should not only be held by city officials, but also by individuals and organizations that live and operate in New York. This private sector element of emergency preparedness was the subject of the third session. Flynn described private preparedness as a matter of “civic duty” and “good citizenship.” According to

Raisch and Runge, there should be better guidance from Washington on what measures the private sector should take. "Education is critical," Raisch said.
